Will you still be my best friend next time? Understanding friendship stability in neurodivergent adolescents

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Abstract

Adolescent friendships enhance quality of life and can be arguably even more crucial for neurodivergent individuals who often report struggling with social exclusion and loneliness (McCausland et al., 2020). Close friendships within this population can combat said barriers by increasing feelings of happiness (Fulford & Cobigo, 2016), self-confidence (Lafferty et al., 2013), and community engagement (Athamanah et al., 2019), yet not much is known about the qualities that define these friendships or make them long-lasting (Josol et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews and standardized assessments were conducted with neurodivergent adolescents to: (a) understand the perspectives and definitions of friendship, and (b) examine whether adolescents' social skills and dyadic friendship quality predict whether a friendship remains stable over a 2-month period. Results suggest that neurodivergent adolescents understand friendship as a multidimensional, highly valued relationship, characterized by mutual respect, support, and reciprocal interactions. Most friendships did not remain stable over the two-month period, and this instability was not explained by adolescents' social skills or their perceived friendship quality.

Keywords: adolescence; neurodivergent; friendship; social skills; relationships; stability.

1. Introduction

Friendships are among the most influential relationships throughout the lifespan, contributing to enhanced quality of life and cognitive, emotional, and physical development (Athamanah et al., 2019; Bukowski et al., 2018; Erdley & Day, 2017; Josol et al., 2022). Developmental psychologists argue that the significance of friendships increases with age (Guroglu, 2022; Hartup, 1996), evolving from simple companionship in childhood to sources of trust, intimacy, and self-worth in adolescence (Berndt, 2004). For neurodivergent adolescents, friendships are just as vital (Athamanah et al., 2019; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). Here, we use the term "neurodivergent" to refer to individuals with autism, as well as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder/condition (ADHD/ADHC), and other neurodevelopmental conditions (APA, 2013). Neurodivergent individuals frequently report social exclusion and loneliness (Athamanah et al., 2019; McClausland et al., 2020; Sigstad, 2016) whereas friendships within this population are linked to happiness (Fulford & Cobigo, 2016), self-confidence (Lafferty et al., 2013), and community participation (Athamanah et al., 2019). However, little is known about what makes these friendships stable or of high-quality (Josol et al., 2022).

2. Literature Review

Adolescent friendships are typically characterized by closeness, trust, and mutual support (Webster & Carter, 2013; Roach, 2019). In adolescence, friends are often rated as more important than family members or romantic partners (Kiesner et al., 2004), likely because this stage is marked by developmental shifts where peers become primary sources of emotional support (Josol et al., 2022; Kirmayer et al., 2021). This period can also present heightened mental health risks and diminished academic motivation (Ng-Knight et al., 2018), and friendship serves a protective function (Lessard & Juvonen, 2022). For friendship to offer such benefits, it is likely that the relationship needs to be both high in quality and stable over time (Ng-Knight et al., 2018; Poulin & Chan, 2010).

2.1. Friendship Quality and Stability

High-quality friendships are marked by high levels of intimacy, empathy, and prosocial behavior, and low levels of conflict or dominance (Ng-Knight et al., 2018; Erdley & Day, 2017). These friendships are linked to better mental health, academic performance, and life satisfaction (Alsarrani et al., 2022; Feeney & Collins, 2014; Kirmayer et al., 2021; Wentzel et al., 2018). Friendships that are higher in quality are also more likely to be linked with lower depressive symptoms and loneliness (Lieb & Bohnert, 2017; Lodder et al., 2017), less aggression (Preddy & Fite, 2012), and greater life satisfaction in adolescents (Laghi et al., 2016).

Researchers are increasingly examining whether friendships must be long-lasting to provide these meaningful benefits (Ng-Knight et al., 2018; Meter & Card, 2016; Poulin & Chan, 2010). Compared to fleeting friendships, stable friendships offer emotional security during times of social transition (Lessard & Juvonen, 2022), and are associated with improved academic functioning (Ng-Knight et al., 2018) and better mental health (Marengo et al., 2018). However, friendship instability is common in early adolescence, with studies showing that only 21% of friendships last a full academic year (Ferguson et al., 2022). Even short-term studies, lasting only a few weeks, report moderate stability (Carins et al., 1995). While some findings suggest that stability increases in older adolescence (Degirmencioglu et al., 1998), others argue that instability remains consistent across this developmental period (Meter & Card, 2016).

Friendship quality and stability are shaped by both intrapersonal factors (social skills, behavioral challenges) and interpersonal factors (dyadic similarity, support, and intimacy) (Bukowski et al., 2018; Hartl et al., 2015). Adolescents with poor social-emotional adjustment often struggle with friendship initiation and maintenance. Internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, shyness) can lower perceived friendship quality and increase instability (Marengo et al., 2018). Externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity) also hinder friendship stability (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007), as these qualities affect conflict strategies leading to friendship difficulties (Poulin & Chan, 2010). Conversely, youth with prosocial tendencies and high social status tend to have more stable friendships (Bowker et al., 2006; Flannery & Smith, 2017). Social competence, which can be expressed by exhibiting kindness and helpfulness, plays a significant role in the development and maintenance of friendships (Thomas & Bowker, 2013). Overall, these findings suggest that social skills and behavioral tendencies at the individual level may subsequently impact adolescent's ability to maintain high quality, stable friendships (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Hartl et al., 2015; Marengo et al., 2018; Poulin & Chan, 2010). In addition to individual characteristics, interpersonal characteristics (i.e., those that define the friendship as an entity) are also thought to contribute to friendship strength. Adolescents whose friendships are based on shared interests, gender, and emotional closeness, report greater stability (Hartl et al., 2015; Poulin & Chan, 2010). Dyadic similarity in behavior and peer status is thought to be essential for friendship development and maintenance across the lifespan (Blieszner & Ogletree, 2017; Kiesner et al., 2004; Poulin & Chan, 2010). Further, supportive friendships marked by intimacy, security, emotional disclosure, and empathic understanding are considered essential components of high-quality friendships (Poulin & Chan, 2010; Wood et al., 2017).

While existing research shows that friendships can be an important protective factor for typically developing adolescents, at-risk youth (such as those with internalizing or externalizing difficulties) may face challenges in achieving stable, high-quality friendships and experiencing their associated benefits. For neurodivergent adolescents in particular, differences in social skills and in the value placed on intimacy, emotional disclosure, and security suggest that traditional models of friendship quality and stability may not fully apply. This underscores the need to examine the distinct factors that foster strong, enduring friendships among adolescents who experience additional social and interpersonal barriers.

2.2. Friendships in Neurodivergent Adolescents

Friendship offers the same, if not greater, benefits to neurodivergent youth (Callus, 2017), and yet this group faces significant barriers: reduced social networks, fewer reciprocal friendships, and limited community access (Athamanah et al., 2019; Petrina et al., 2014; Verdonschot et al., 2009), while expressing a strong desire for connection (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Mendelson et al., 2016). These meaningful relationships can contribute to increased community engagement and participation (Lafferty et al., 2013; Petrina et al., 2014), a sense of community belonging, and greater self-worth (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Mason et al., 2013), leading to improvement in mental and emotional health (Josol et al., 2022). Neurodivergent adolescents who are satisfied with their friendship support are also less likely to be negatively affected by peer victimization (Libster et al., 2025).

Friendships of neurodivergent adolescents may be characterized differently than friendships of typically developing adolescents (Sigstad, 2016; Tipton et al., 2013). In the literature pertaining to typically developing teens, friendships were described as involving "attributes of support, intimacy, affection, trust, ability to manage conflict, and time" (Roach, 2016, p. 330). However, compared to their typically developing peers, neurodivergent adolescents are less likely to define friendships in terms of intimacy or emotional support and instead are more likely to emphasize companionship, similarity, and shared activity (Matheson et al., 2007; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). Reciprocity and shared activities are especially valued, including mutual support and simply spending time together (Jackson et al., 2024; Garolera et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2013).

Some research shows that neurodivergent adolescents rate their friendships as lower quality, particularly in terms of closeness or emotional reciprocity (Athamanah et al., 2019; Mendelson et al., 2016; Tipton et al., 2013). However, the standard definitions used to assess friendship quality, such as security, closeness, help, and conflict resolution (Mendelson et al., 2016), may not reflect the focus of this population. Qualities like emotional disclosure may be less central to their experience, suggesting the need for adapted frameworks when measuring friendship satisfaction (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018).

Despite valuing friendships, neurodivergent youth may have fewer opportunities to initiate and sustain them. Only 56% of neurodivergent adolescents are content with the number of friends they have (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017), and only half of neurodivergent older adults' report having a best friend (McClausland et al., 2020). Yet, there is a near-total absence of studies investigating friendship stability in neurodivergent adolescents, a critical gap given their vulnerability to social isolation.

Social skills are considered crucial for the development and maintenance of friendships, whereas social skill difficulties, a common feature of neurodivergent adolescents, may be seen as an interpersonal barrier to friendship development and maintenance (Athamanah et al., 2019; Josol et al., 2022). Communication difficulties common in neurodivergent individuals (including ASD and ADHD) may hinder both friendship formation and maintenance (Athamanah et al., 2019; Josol et al., 2022). Poor behavioral regulation is linked to lower-quality friendships (Tipton et al., 2013). This is congruent with the work outlined earlier, which posits that poor psychosocial adjustment, affectively charged interactions, internalizing symptoms, victimizing tendencies, and externalizing factors are all thought to hinder friendship stability and quality (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007; Hartl et al., 2015; Marengo et al., 2018; Poulin & Chan, 2010).

Neurodivergent youth often emphasize shared interests as a defining friendship trait (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Matheson et al., 2007). The importance of similarity and shared interests continues to be referenced by neurodivergent adolescents across the literature, as they see friends as people who are trustworthy and who share similar interests (Athamanah et al., 2019; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Matheson et al., 2007; Roach, 2016). Friendships in neurodivergent adolescents may be less emotionally reciprocal (Tipton et al., 2013), and characterized by less closeness and less positive reciprocity compared to the friendships of their 'neurotypical' peers (Singstad, 2017). This may mean that neurodivergent youth score lower on dimensions of friendship quality, when assessed through factors like friendship supportiveness and intimacy, which are highly cited as contributing to improved friendship quality (Laurenceau et al., 2004; Wood et al., 2017). Adjusted metrics may be necessary to understand what support means within these relationships.

3. Purpose of the Present Study

Despite extensive research linking friendships with happiness (Fulford & Cobigo, 2016), self-confidence (Lafferty et al., 2013), and community engagement (Athamanah et al., 2019), there is a paucity of research examining the factors that influence the quality and stability of friendships for neurodivergent adolescents. While friendships are a protective factor for these adolescents, little is known about what contributes to their longevity or perceived quality. This is concerning given that neurodivergent children have fewer friends than do their neurotypical peers (Tipton et al., 2013), and only half of neurodivergent adults have someone in their life that they would consider a 'best friend' (McClausland et al., 2020). Therefore, this study addresses two main questions:

(1) How do neurodivergent adolescents define and understand friendships?
(2) Do social skills, behavioral tendencies, perceived similarity, or supportiveness predict whether friendships remain stable over time?

This study aims to inform future interventions designed to support social development in this underserved population.

4. Method

This project was approved by the University's Ethics Review Board. Participants were recruited from a high school serving neurodiverse adolescents aged 13–16 years-old. Inclusion criteria were: (1) age 13-16; (2) a formal diagnosis and (3) verbal communication skills to participate in a semi-structured interview. Eligible students were identified by their school psychologist, and received a flyer outlining study details. Interested families returned signed parent consent forms, after which an in-person assent session was scheduled at the school for the adolescent. The principal investigator reviewed consent materials with participants individually and obtained written assent before proceeding with the study.

4.1 Procedure

Two individual sessions were conducted at the school, scheduled at least two weeks apart. In both sessions, participants completed semi-structured interviews and standardized questionnaires. After Session 1, participants took home a sealed envelope for their caregiver containing demographic and behavioral questionnaires, which were returned to the school. In each session, participants were asked to name their "best, best friend right now." If the same friend was nominated at both sessions, the friendship was considered stable. The average interval between sessions was 31 days (range: 14–56 days).

4.2. Participants

Through recruitment via a purposive sampling method, nine adolescents (5 male, 4 female; ages 13–16) participated in the current study. All were neurodivergent and diagnosed with common co-occurring conditions including ASD, ADHD, and language disorders. One participant completed only one session and was excluded from stability analysis but included in aggregate measures. Missing questionnaire data

from some participants or caregivers were noted and accounted for. For reasons of confidentiality, all participants are assigned pseudonyms in the current report.

Table 1: *Participant Code, Pseudonym, age, and gender*

Participant Code	Pseudonym	Age in Years	Gender
Participant 1 (P1)	Anthony	15	Male
Participant 2 (P2)	Blake	14	Male
Participant 3 (P3)	Camilla	15	Female
Participant 4 (P4)	Danielle	15	Female
Participant 5 (P5)	Enzo	15	Male
Participant 6 (P6)	Farah	15	Female
Participant 7 (P7)	Gianni	16	Male
Participant 8 (P8)	Harmony	14	Female
Participant 9 (P9)	Ibrahim	13	Male

4.3. Measures

Friendship Definition

Participants were asked: "What does friendship mean to you?" and "What qualities are most important in a friend?" Follow-up questions regarding friendship formation were posed to contribute to a well-rounded understanding of their realities. Responses were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative coding techniques.

Friendship Stability

Friendship was considered stable if the same best friend was nominated at both timepoints. Given prior research showing changes in friendships even across short intervals (Witkow et al., 2022), a short span was deemed appropriate to assess short-term stability. Social skills, behavioral tendencies, similarity between dyads, and friendship supportiveness were also assessed, with the goal of evaluating their potential effects on the likelihood of maintaining a stable friendship.

Social Skills & Behavioral Tendencies. Participants completed the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008) at both sessions, with verbal instructions and visual response options. Items assessed cooperation, assertion, responsibility, and self-control, along with externalizing, internalizing, and hyperactive behaviors. The SSIS was completed by participants twice (once at each testing session) as to evaluate any change in social skill and/or problem behaviors; caregivers also completed the SSIS Parent Report once to corroborate the adolescent's answers. For analysis, subscale scores were collapsed into overall social skills and problem behavior scores. Raw scores were tallied and averaged, so each participant's score was analyzed in deviation from the mean.

Relational & Perceived Similarity. Participants reported their gender and age and that of their nominated friend. They were also asked, "Do you think you and your friend are similar or different?" Follow-up questions encouraged elaboration on shared interests or traits.

Friendship Supportiveness. Friendship support was measured using the Close Person's Questionnaire (CPQ; Stansfeld & Marmot, 1992), adapted for verbal administration. Participants responded on a 5-point scale (never to very often), with visual aids provided. Questions covered emotional, social, and practical support (e.g., "How often does your friend make you feel good about yourself?"). Negative support (e.g., stress or unmet needs) was also assessed. Scores were summed and collapsed into two indices: friendship supportiveness and friendship inadequacy. The standard deviation and differences from the mean were calculated to facilitate comparisons across friendships in the sample.

4.4. Data Analysis

Interview responses were coded using in-vivo and axial qualitative methods to identify themes. Descriptive statistics were used to assess friendship stability. Correlations were conducted to explore associations between stability and social skills, problem behavior, similarity, and perceived support. Means and standard deviations were calculated to compare participants who maintained versus changed best friends. The goal of the analyses was to (a) assess the general stability of friendships within neurodivergent adolescents over a time span; and (b) examine whether certain personal and/or relationship characteristics contribute to the stability of said friendships.

5. *Results*

Research Question 1: How do Neurodivergent Adolescents Understand Friendship?

Friendship Means Knowing Someone Most participants emphasized familiarity, kindness, and helpfulness when defining friendship. The most common response (6/9 participants) was that friendship means knowing someone well. For instance:
Anthony (P1): "If they're your friend, you remember who they are."
Blake (P2): "Best friends knows us a lot. Knows a bit about ourselves."
This definition emphasized the importance of both personal knowledge and public recognition as key components of a meaningful friendship.

Friendship Means Being Nice and Helpful Five participants described friends as people who are nice or kind, and understood friendship to be a reciprocal relationship where friends are expected to treat each other with kindness. Some examples across participants include:
Camilla (P3): "Friendship means to me as like, being like kind, being kind and caring."
Danielle (P4): "You kind of define it as good friends, that your friends are nice to you."
Farah (P6): "Friendship is being nice to your friend."
This perspective highlights the importance of positive behavior and mutual respect as fundamental aspects of a meaningful friendship. Similarly, four of the nine participants identified helping others as central to their definition of friendship For example:
Blake (P2): "Friendship means that friends always help each other."
Danielle (P4): "Like when somebody is sad, you'll be there for them."
 All of these participants described themselves as helpers, without explicitly expecting help in return. This perspective underscores the mutual and supportive nature of friendships.

Friendship Means Companionship Only two participants focused on companionship (e.g., spending time together) as central, where to them, the essence of friendship lays in shared experiences that come from hanging out together.
Farah (P6): *"Friendship is being with your friends at recess"*
This view highlights the social aspect of friendship, where the bond is strengthened through regular interaction and the enjoyment of each other's company, rather than through deep emotional support or

other responsibilities. For these participants, friendship may be about creating shared memories and having a consistent presence in each other's lives.

Friendships are Important and Valuable Despite differences in emphasis, all participants valued friendship (n = 9), and almost all shared that their lives would be different without their friends in it (n = 7).

Farah (P6): "Friendship is a lot to me."
Blake (P2): "It means a lot to be friends"
Some participants (n = 4) went on to say that without friends, they might feel bored, alone, or sad. For example,
Camilla (P3): "It would make me feel sad not having friends."
Blake (P2): "[Without my friends] I would be lonely, left alone…."
This sentiment underscores the significance of friendships, as participants acknowledged the positive impact friends have on their well-being and the value they place on these relationships.

Friendship Formation

To better understand how friendships are formed and later maintained, participants were also asked how they met and became friends. Participants described forming friendships through introducing themselves (6/9), mutual agreement (2/9), or becoming friends right away (6/9). This suggests that while some see friendship as reciprocal and deliberate, others describe it as intuitive or spontaneous.

You Have to Introduce Yourself Many participants (n = 6) emphasized the need to introduce themselves as the first step in forming a friendship. This proactive approach often involved taking the initiative in reaching out, starting a conversation, and showing a genuine interest in the other person.
Camilla (P3): "When somebody comes up to someone and they ask if they want to talk and they're like, yes, and we get to know them. And that's how friendships start."
Danielle (P4): "You meet them first and then after that it's like, 'hi, what's your name?'
And then you're starting to know each other and then you become friends."

Friendship as a Mutual Agreement Some participants (n = 2) felt it necessary for both parties to recognize and commit to being friends. In other words, friendships are formed when one explicitly asks to be friends, and the other agrees.
 Harmony (P7): "You ask them if they want to be your friend. "
Ibrahim (P9): "You kind of ask like, 'You want to be my friend in the world?' They still say yes."
This theme highlights the reciprocal nature of friendship, where both individuals agree to invest time, effort, and emotional support into the relationship. It might underscore the understanding that friendship is a two-way street, requiring commitment and mutual understanding from both sides.

Becoming Friends Right Away When prompted, most participants (n = 6) shared that they and their nominated best friend became friends immediately after meeting, indicating an instant connection or shared interest that sparked the friendship. This theme suggests that, for some, friendship can form quickly when there is a natural rapport or common ground, leading to an immediate and strong bond.
Anthony (P1): "I just, just saw him and we just became friends […] It's a bit easy and a bit hard at the same time to make friends."

Important Qualities in a Friend
When further discussing their perspectives of friendship, participants were posed: "In general, what qualities do you think are important for a friend to have?" Their responses very closely reflected the qualities they ascribe to their own friends, and also parallel with their definitions of friendship. Two common themes include helpfulness and kindness, which parallels with their definitions of friendship. Other qualities that were commonly noted were trustworthiness and enjoyableness, with some participants noting the importance of being caring and mutually respectful of each other's feelings.

Friends Should Be Kind & Helpful All participants (n = 9) emphasized the importance of kindness in friendships, highlighting the need for friends to be caring, supportive, and compassionate towards each other. This was evident as participants described their friends, for example:

Anthony (P1): "He's kind."

Kindness was also a quality that participants explained is fundamental to being a good friend, and parallels with their common definition of friendship ("Friendship Means Being Nice," n = 6). However, follow-up questions reveal that this definition may be too broad, encompassing all friendly encounters as friendships, even those who may be strangers.

Interviewer: How do you know when someone is your friend?

Harmony (P8): "They [friends] are really sweet and friendly with you."

Interviewer: What if you see somebody at the grocery store who's really nice to you;

Does that make them a friend?

Harmony (P8): "Yeah."

Friends Should Be Funny Participants (n = 6) appreciated friends who bring joy, fun, and positivity into their lives, making their interactions enjoyable and uplifting.

Interviewer: What are some important qualities, do you think, in a friend?

Gianni (P7): Kind, helpful, funny. Funny, that's important. Yeah;

Anthony (P1): He's a good friend.

Interviewer: What makes him a good friend?

Anthony (P1): "Um, um, the way he makes me like, he makes funny sounds and that kind of makes me laugh."

Friends Should Be Trustworthy Another noted quality was trustworthiness. Participants (n = 3) valued friends who are reliable, honest, and can be trusted with personal information and feelings.

Interviewer: So for you, you mentioned kindness, you mentioned telling secrets, and somebody honest…

Camilla (P3): Um, honest, keeping secrets, and kind.

Interviewer: Are those like the most important qualities of a friend, you think?

Camilla (P3): Yeah, yeah. Me and [friend] keep everything together. I tell her my secrets, and she tells me hers so yeah, we keep everything.

Friends Should Provide Company When asked about important qualities in a friend, participants (n = 3) considered the provision of time spent together as an important attribute. This includes "hanging out" or being someone available to talk to, as seen:

Interviewer: What are the most important qualities for a friend to have?

Anthony (P1): Um, hanging out, um, um, like just, just hanging out and stuff;

Interviewer: What are some important qualities in a friend?

Farah (P6): Hang out. Play together. Oh! Talk together. I forgot. That's the best one.

Friends Should Check-In on Each Other Some participants (n = 3) highlighted the importance of friends checking in on each other's well-being, showing concern, and being attentive to each other's needs.

Camilla (P3): Uh, yesterday she told me that and, um, and she, she asked me if it hurt my feelings and I'm like, no, it's okay. It's, uh, it's not your fault.

Maintenance Factors

While not always directly queried in the semi-structured interview script, certain recurring themes emerged in discussions that may likely influence the establishment and sustenance of friendships. These themes related to friendship maintenance included proximity (i.e. how physical space plays a part), whether they communicate outside –of school, the level of parent involvement, and occasional hardships.

Distance vs. Proximity All participants described friends as peers from school.

Blake (P2): He's in the class right close to us. […] We see each other at recess. We come to the same math class.

As this appeared to be a common theme, it may be worth exploring how physical distance or closeness between friends impacts their relationship. Further, given that all participants and their friends are enrolled in an adapted secondary school, this means that all friendship dyads were of the same neurotype (i.e., both neurodivergent).

Out of School Contact Five shared that they only see their friends at school, while four participants (P3, P4, P6, P9) mentioned seeing their friends outside of the school contexts (e.g., playdates, birthday parties, etc.). Only three participants (P1, P3, and P4) mentioned communicating outside of school via phone calls or social media.
Interviewer: Do you talk to [your friend] outside of school? Or are you only seeing him at school?
Enzo (P5): Only at school. It's hard. I don't know if he has a number, but I don't. He uses the Facebook. Snapchat. And that's hard for me to use.

Role of Parents Several noted using parents' phones or needing permission for contact. Sometimes, participants describe how they or their friend borrow a parent's phone so that they can communicate (n = 3), or how they are able to spend time together outside of school with their parents' permission (n = 3).
Farah (P6): I was using my mom's phone, and he actually FaceTimed me (giggles), and I was like, oh my god, I was, like, so surprised. I could actually FaceTime him because it actually worked.

Hardships in Friendship While this project used strength-based language to inquire only about the factors that facilitate friendships, few participants (n = 2) referenced minor friendship challenges (e.g., unreturned texts or missed birthday parties), but did not express distress.
Anthony (P1): I have his number on my phone and I like texting him because I- it's been a while, and he's like, for some reason he doesn't like probably never answers.
These contextual details suggest that external factors, like school structure and parent facilitation, influence how friendships are sustained.

Research Question 2: Do Social Skills, Similarity, or Supportiveness Influence Friendship Stability?
Of the eight participants who completed both sessions, only two (P3 and P5) nominated the same best friend at both timepoints. This suggests a low rate of short-term friendship stability (~25%).
Table 2 summarized each participant's interval between sessions, SSIS and CPQ scores, and whether their nominated best friend remained the same. The average interval was 31 days (range: 14–56 days). While the goal was a 2-month gap, school scheduling made exact consistency difficult.

Table 2

Summary of Scores: Social Skills, Friendship Quality, and Friendship Stability
Note. The higher the score for Social Skills, Problem Behavior, Friendship Supportiveness, and

Participant	Days Between Sessions	SSIS Raw Scores (Timepoint 1)		Friendship Quality (Cambridge)		Friendship Stability
		Social Skills	Problem Behavior	Friendship Supportiveness	Friendship Inadequacy	
P1	56	75	21	16	12	No
P2	56	43	65	15	9	No
P3	**49**	**78**	**28**	**22**	**5**	Yes
P4	49	91	33	18	6	No
P5	**21**	**96**	**14**	**15**	**14**	Yes
P6	21	110	42	21	4	No
P7	N/A	65	32	18	8	N/A
P8	14	72	36	15	10	No
P9	14	83	12	19	6	No
Mean	*35*	*79.22*	*31.44*	*17.67*	*8.22*	
σ	*17.85*	*18.16*	*15.14*	*2.65*	*3.15*	

Friendship Inadequacy suggests elevated prevalence of each domain. Ideally, participants would want to score high on Social Skills and Friendship Supportiveness, and low on Problem Behavior and Friendship Inadequacy.

[a] P7 was unable to complete participation (did not partake in timepoint 2), but their SSIS and Cambridge scores were included to in the calculations for the means as to best represent the sample.

Friendship Quality & Social Skills

The two participants with stable friendships had average or mixed scores for their individual social skills and their friendship supportiveness. For Camilla (P3), she had average social skills (SSIS = 78), average friendship supportiveness (CPQ = 22), and low friendship inadequacy (5). Enzo (P5) had high social skills (SSIS = 96), but high friendship inadequacy (14), and average friendship supportiveness (15).
Other participants had either high social skills but low stability (P6), or low problem behavior but still unstable friendships (P9). This suggests no consistent pattern between friendship quality, problem behavior, and stability.

Relational Similarity

Participants shared demographic data (age, gender) about their best friend, and whether they perceived them as similar or different. Most participants were in same-gender and similar-age dyads. When asked about similarity, 5 out of the 8 said they were similar, mostly due to shared interests; and 2 out of the 8 said they were different, citing different hobbies. The two stable friendships (P3 and P5) were in same-gender, similar-age dyads, and both participants perceived strong similarity. Only one other participant (P6) reported this pattern but did not retain the same best friend.

Table 3

Similarity Between Participants and Their First Nominated Very Best Friend

Participant	Characteristics		Perceived Similarity or Difference	
	Gender	Age	Participant Response	Rationale
Anthony (P1)	Same	Friend is 1 year older	"A Bit" Similar	Different interests, live far away
Blake (P2)	Same	Friend is 1 year older	Different	Different interests. Similar personality when prompted
Camilla (P3)	Same	Friend is 1 year older	Similar	Similar interests
Danielle (P4)	Different	Friend is 1 year older	"No Idea"	Some similar interests
Enzo (P5)	Same	Same	Similar	Similar interests
Farah (P6)	Same	Same	Similar	Look similar & similar interests
Harmony (P8)	Different	Friend is 1 year younger	Similar	Similar interests
Ibrahim (P9)	Same	Friend is 1 year older	Different	Unsure – Same interests

Note. P7 not included in this table as he did not participate in the second session.

Social Skills Over Time

SSIS scores showed a small decrease from timepoint 1 to 2 (mean dropped from 79.22 to 73.56). Two participants did not complete timepoint 2; notably, one of them (P6) had the highest initial social skills score. Parent SSIS forms were returned for 7 out of 9 participants. Raw scores were generally higher (due to longer item sets), but alignment with youth self-reports was mixed. This measure was retained as a validity check but not used in correlation analysis due to the small sample size.

Table 4

Social Skills Intervention Scale (SSIS) Scores, Ranked from Highest (Top) to Lowest (Bottom)

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	Self-Report		Parent Report

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Social Skills Ranking - Time 1   Social Skills Ranking – Time 2   Social Skills Ranking

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Farah / P6 (110)	Danielle / P4 (95)	Camilla / P3 (113)
Enzo / P5 (96)	Ibrahim / P9 (91)	Blake / P2 (100)
Danielle / P4 (91)	Enzo / PS (76)	Gianni / P7 (98)
Ibrahim / P9 (83)	Harmony / P8 (73)	Anthony / P1 (97)
Camilla / P3 (78)	Blake / P2 (65)	Danielle / P4 (93)
Anthony / P1 (75)	Anthony /P1 (61)	Farah / P6 (91)
Harmony / P8 (72)	Camilla / P3 (54)	Enzo / P5 (66)
Gianni / P7 (65)		

Blake / P2 (83)

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6. Summary

Only two participants maintained the same best friend over time, suggesting low short-term friendship stability. These stable friendships were marked by perceived similarity and average-to-high social skills, but other participants with similar profiles had unstable friendships. No clear patterns emerged linking stability with friendship quality or problem behavior scores. Friendship formation and maintenance appeared heavily influenced by school structure, shared interests, and facilitated communication (e.g., parental involvement).

7. Discussion

This study sought to better understand how neurodivergent adolescents define and experience friendship, and whether social-emotional traits, interpersonal qualities, or perceived similarity influence short-term friendship stability. Results revealed that although participants highly valued their friendships, only two out of eight friendships remained stable over a short span of time, suggesting that instability may be prevalent even within a one-month timeframe. Contrary to predictions, friendship quality and social skills did not consistently predict friendship stability, raising questions about how these relationships are formed and maintained in neurodivergent adolescents.

How Neurodivergent Adolescents Define Friendship

Participants described friendships as being characterized by knowing each other, kindness, helpfulness, and companionship, echoing definitions observed in prior studies (e.g., Matheson et al., 2007; Fulford & Cobigo, 2018). Most adolescents used relational and action-based descriptors, focusing on shared activities, trust, and emotional safety. Some unique features emerged: Participants viewed friendship as mutual but not necessarily emotionally intimate; The concept of reciprocity was embedded in how participants described helping or checking in on friends. Enjoyment and fun (e.g., joking or "being funny") were valued but not frequently discussed in prior research. This suggests that, for neurodivergent youth, friendships are both functional and affectively meaningful, yet may be defined differently than in typically developing peers.

The majority of participants reported that friendships formed quickly, often right after meeting someone, and were reinforced through repeated interactions at school. This aligns with previous findings that emphasize proximity and shared environments as central to friendship formation in neurodivergent youth (Athamanah et al., 2019). While this pattern may reflect natural rapport, it also points to a lack of formal friendship-building skills or limited guidance in initiating and maintaining deeper emotional connections.

Important Friendship Qualities

When asked about qualities that mattered in a friend, participants emphasized kindness, helpfulness, and shared time. A few also referenced trust, including keeping secrets and emotional support. Interestingly, only a few mentioned conflict resolution, compromise, or empathy, which are traits that are typically cited in research on adolescent friendship quality (Ng-Knight et al., 2018; Roach, 2019). The consistency between participants' friendship definitions and the qualities they admired (e.g., "being nice" and "being helpful") suggests that neurodivergent adolescents may place a higher value on reliability and supportiveness than on emotional intimacy or vulnerability. These preferences may reflect both developmental patterns and learned expectations about peer interactions.

Role of Context in Friendship Maintenance

In describing how friendships were sustained, participants revealed several contextual factors: Most friends were classmates, reinforcing the role of school as the central social arena. As all participants shared that their friends attended the same adapted secondary school, all friendship dyads were of the same neurotype (i.e., both neurodivergent). This is congruent with works suggesting that neurodivergent individuals have more friendships with other neurodivergent people than they do with "neurotypical" people, and they tend to prefer these friendships (Sharman & Seedorf, 2025).

Only some friendships extended beyond school, and communication was often mediated by parents or access to technology. Proximity and regular face-to-face contact were cited as facilitators of connection; distance and lack of communication tools were cited as barriers. These findings support prior research suggesting that external structures and adult support play a critical role in facilitating friendships among neurodivergent youth (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2017). This also implies that friendship sustainability may be contingent on environment and access, rather than solely on interpersonal compatibility.

Understanding Friendship Stability

Despite high levels of reported friendship satisfaction, only 2 of 8 participants nominated the same best friend at both timepoints. This is consistent with prior work showing high rates of friendship turnover among adolescents, (Ferguson et al., 2022; Poulin & Chan, 2010). Interestingly, the two participants who maintained a stable best friend reported average-to-high social skills, moderate perceived support, and high perceived similarity. This is partly in line with research suggesting that friendship similarity (in terms of age, gender, and interests) may increase the likelihood of stability (Hartl et al., 2015). However, other participants with similarly high social skills or similarity perceptions did not maintain stable friendships, indicating that these factors may not operate in isolation.

The Role of Social Skills and Supportiveness

Social skills were hypothesized to relate to friendship quality and stability, but findings were mixed: Participants with the highest social skills scores did not necessarily retain the same best friend; Friendship supportiveness, as rated on the CPQ, also did not reliably predict stability. One stable friendship was rated as having high inadequacy on the CPQ, suggesting a potential disconnect between self-reported satisfaction and standardized quality measures.

These findings echo previous critiques that traditional friendship measures may not fully capture the values or experiences of neurodivergent youth (Fulford & Cobigo, 2018; Tipton et al., 2013). For example, intimacy and emotional closeness, which are central to many standardized scales, may be less prioritized than reliability or companionship in this group. Additionally, the small sample size and short

measurement window may limit the strength of these conclusions. However, the variation across participants supports the idea that friendship experiences among neurodivergent youth are complex, varied, and shaped by context.

8. Limitations and Future Research

With only nine participants, and just eight completing both timepoints, the sample size is small. Participants were all from the same school, limiting variability in demographics, cognitive profiles, and environmental exposure. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, including students from mainstream and inclusive educational settings. This study relied on adapted versions of the CPQ and SSIS, which may not fully capture the friendship values or interpersonal dynamics experienced by neurodivergent adolescents. Future tools should include participant-defined markers of friendship success, such as "fun," "togetherness," or "being available," rather than relying solely on derived constructs like intimacy or empathy. Additionally, because friendships were assessed via self-report and single-item nominations, it is unclear how stable or reciprocal these friendships were. Follow-up studies should consider dyadic interviews, longer follow-up periods, and peer-reported reciprocity. The role of family, school structure, and access to communication tools emerged as important themes in maintaining friendships. These factors should be more explicitly included in future models, especially as they may disproportionately affect neurodivergent youth, who often require support to initiate and sustain social interactions.

9. Conclusion

This study contributes to the limited but growing body of literature exploring friendship quality and stability among neurodivergent adolescents. It confirms that neurodivergent youth value their friendships deeply, often defining them through support, kindness, familiarity, and shared time. However, short-term friendship stability was low, and commonly used predictors such as social skills or perceived supportiveness did not reliably indicate which friendships would last. Importantly, this study calls into question the applicability of standardized friendship metrics for neurodiverse youth. The findings suggest a need for more nuanced, culturally and developmentally sensitive tools that reflect the lived realities of neurodivergent adolescents. By understanding how these youths experience friendship and identifying what sustains it, researchers and practitioners can better support the social inclusion and emotional wellbeing of this underserved population.

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